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Contemporary Daoist Tangki Practice

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Abstract and Keywords

Since 1979, China has seen a renaissance of indigenous belief systems, including Daoist *tangki* spirit-medium practice. *Tangki* traditions have Neolithic roots. The founding myth is of a man who magically battled flood demons to save China. In imperial times, ordi-nary people, disenfranchised by the state religion and pawns of dynastic wars, created a soteriology of self-empowerment. Ordinary people would transform through spirit pos-session into warrior gods who would save the community. Millennia-old *tangki* traditions have diffused into the modern Chinese quotidian. With a remote Central Committee of the Communist Party recalling distant emperors, village temples, many led by *tangkis*, have formed "second governments" to deal with day-to-day exigencies. Religion offers a cultural lens to obtain new perspectives of the Chinese worldview.

Keywords: tangki, China, Chinese, daoist, spirit possession, medium, shaman, demon, ritual, gods

Introduction

Chinese popular religion staged a strong comeback on the mainland within three years of the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), demonstrating thereby that ancient indigenous religious practices remain meaningful in modern Chinese society. This essay examines one such tradition—*tangki* (spirit-medium) practice—in order to understand how millennia-old religious ideas and anachronistic rituals are still relevant in the present day and to extrapolate the findings into further understandings of the Chinese worldview.

Tangki practice is a signifying religion of the Minnan people.[1] The roots of the tradition lie in Neolithic tribal beliefs, but the practice thrives today in southeastern China, and in the Minnan diaspora of Taiwan and Southeast Asia. I propose that the religion endures for its pragmatic philosophy of communal self-reliance. The knowledge that self-reliance underlies much of Chinese thinking is useful in understanding the current positions that China takes on the world stage.

The overt face of *tangki* practice is anachronistic. Theatrical rituals, including bloody self-mortification, make the religion incomprehensible, even repellent to the modern viewer. The author urges a reading beyond the surface. The theatrics form mere ornamentation that invests utilitarian objectives of communal survival with an aura of mysticism. Rituals invoking gods give the community comfort during periods of hardship.

We open with a discussion of the fundamental concepts and theology of *tangki* practice.

Daoist *Tangki* Practice: Concept and Theology

Gods possess mediums in order to be able to deal directly with devotees. The *tangki* is a vessel for the gods, "caught" and put into service.[2] One medium can serve multiple gods.

Mediums possess the quality of spiritual childhood.[3] This is why they are named "child-diviners," in Hokkien, *tangki* (pinyin *tongji*).[4] Believers form cults around charismatic *tangkis*, but it is important to note *tangkis* are not gods; it

is only during possession that a medium is held to be a god-incarnate.

The transmogrification of a man into a god happens through the magic of theanthropism. Possession is induced by chanting and the loud and rhythmic beating of drums and gongs. The medium trembles dramatically. As the music builds to a crescendo, the medium begins to throw himself about, and then suddenly the medium jumps up and strikes a pose, no longer a man but a god.[5] Assistants dress the medium in garments signifying the possessing god. The medium then performs as the god using mimesis and props.

I have explained this magic of transformation using the concept of the "double-nature-being."[6] When the *tangki* wears the costume of the god and theatrically behaves like the god, he is an image of the god. We can illustrate this with the Western notion of the double of theater: Audiences suspend disbelief and accept that Laurence Olivier onstage is Hamlet, even though they know he is Olivier. My thesis is that the double-nature of the image—ontologically an object, phenomenologically a sign referring to a god—is a condition of spirit potency. The image, *tangkis*, masks, pictures, statues, marionettes are spirit doorways for gods to enter into the mortal realm.[7] *Tangki* ritual requires the medium to first perform ordinariness, then transform into extraordinariness, before returning to ordinariness, a situation that can confound etic spectators who observe reverence toward a possessed medium change into casual disregard for the same person when out of a trance.

The concept of possession usefully provides the community with theological leeway to dismiss recalcitrant mediums. A sacred principle of *tangki* practice decrees that mediums must serve the people freely. Thus the community has only to accuse a *tangki* of having profited from providing spiritual services to declare the medium as unworthy of spirit possession. In the following section we learn how the *tangki* theology of an ordinary man becoming a god-incarnate was developed in response to the disenfranchisement of the peasant community in imperial China.

Who Comes First? The Shaman or the Medium?

Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, surmised religion as a phenomenon present in "the mental universe of archaic man," evinced in hierophany.[8] Parietal Paleolithic art might serve as proof of Eliade's theory. Less persuasive is Eliade's intuited privileging of shamanism over mediumism on the grounds that ascension on celestial voyage is preeminent to the descent of gods in spirit possession.[9]

Primary evidence from interviews with *tangkis* leads me to propose that mediumism and shamanism coexist in the state of religious ecstasy[10] I propose further that spirit possession precedes celestial flight. Only as a god can *tangkis* journey to heaven and hell to serve their devotees. For example, an ex-*tangki* told me how he had entered hell to plead with the gods of Hades to give his mother longevity. He described hell as envisioned by *tangki* devotees, with rows and rows of mansions materialized out of paper houses burned in the mortal realm. The guards at the gate of hell, he said, were the horse- and ox-headed soldiers of popular religion. The *tangki* told me that he revealed what he saw and did in hell to his critically ill mother, in order to assure her that she would recover. By doing this, the *tangki* broke the code of secrecy and lost his spirit-ability to become a medium.[11] This story tells how *tangkis* work to save the people. They plead with more powerful gods, and they fight demons. An epidemic is prevented not with medicine, but by *tangki* deities fighting off plague-causing demons.

The Pragmatism of *Tangki* Practice

Tangki practice is essentially pragmatic. In imperial times, the worship of heaven (*Tian*) was the sole prerogative of the emperor, who was the son of heaven. Peasants could only offer to their ancestors, and then only at home altars.[12] The people wryly noted, "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away," and responded with a philosophy of communal self-reliance. If they could not worship the gods of the state, then they would create their own gods. God-making was easy: Shape an anthropomorphic image of the deity and offer to it.[13] *Tangki* gods were envisioned as humanized deities who understood the needs of man. These gods would rise from within the community through spirit possession.

The timeline of the history of China is a chronology of dynasty change; it is thus also a catalogue of wars since each new regime came into power on the battlefield. The people were pawns of rapacious lords and needed the

protection of warrior gods. Thus Guanyu, a historical general regarded as the greatest soldier of China, was canonized as the mighty God of War. The planet Jupiter became the warrior Emperor of the Dark Heavens, the personal guardian deity of *tangkis.* Co-opted too was Monkey, an indomitable fighter featured in the *Journey to the West*.[14] In this way, *tangki* devotees also made gods to serve every practical need: The God of Fortune, the God of Longevity, and the Thunder deity, to strike enemies dead on command. From Buddhism, the abstract notion of compassion was humanized as Guanyin, a bodhisattva who would live among mortals and respond swiftly to their pleas. It must be noted that all *tangki* gods are warrior spirits. The God of Fortune banishes demons of misfortune; even Guanyin would defeat entire armies of the enemy with a flick of lustral water.

All gods were anthropomorphized, and all were pliable: "I'll give you oranges for now, but if you grant me my wish, I will return with a roasted pig." This idea was extended into the belief that gods could be coerced into service. A person had only to write charms or perform rituals, and gods would do their will. Man was not the supplicant but the controller of the gods. This belief in coercive magic allowed for the vocations of magicians, wizards, priests, and mediums.

Tangki devotees did pay homage to the gods of state religions. From ancestor practice, which began in Shang times (1600–1100 BCE),[15] they personalized the abstract notion of heaven (there are no idols in Beijing's Temple of Heaven) as a celestial emperor at the head of a bureaucracy of their own pliable gods. The cryptic Daoist belief, "The Dao is the One that produced the Two; that produced the Three," was conceptualized as a trinity of scholarly gentlemen, the Three Pure Ones, again placed at the head of the ranks of local deities. Buddha was appropriated to become the ultimate *tangki* deity exceeding even heaven and the Three Pure Ones. Significantly, these exalted gods do not possess mediums, and so do not directly serve devotees. Why then pay homage to such distant gods?

Tangki **Practice and Institutionalized Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism**

The acceptance of state gods at the head of the pantheon of local deities was a political move to align peasant *tangki* practice with official religions and so gain respectability. But despite this strategy, *tangki* practice never achieved state acceptance. The scholar-warrior divide separated *tangki* practice from institutionalized Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

Tangki gods, created before the dawn of Chinese society, are warrior spirits. However, unification under emperors brought peace and a growing economy. Educated administrators rather than generals became the ruling elite. Even from among the *tangkis* there rose in the Liu Song era (420–474) scholar-mediums specializing in spirit-writing.[16] Spirit-writing cults exist to this day, but the practice is covert and exclusive. The vast majority of present-day *tangkis* remain in the ancient mold of warrior spirits, and the unqualified term "*tangki*" refers to warrior mediums. What were the historical factors that shaped the *tangki* as a warrior deity?

The History of ***Tangki*** **Practice**

Modern *tangki* practice is a palimpsest of over 5,000 years of ritual traditions. Writing goes back only to Shang, so that developments in the Xia era (2100–1600 BCE) and earlier have to be hermeneutically surmised from findings from various fields, including archaeology and mythology. Triangulation, using interdisciplinary sources of knowledge, provides theories with some measure of rigor.

Mythology, Anthropology, and Archaeology

This telling of *tangki* history begins with the ancient Yao, who lived before the turn of the third millennium BCE near present-day Hunan and Hupei.[17]Yao youths learned tribal shamanistic lore in order to be initiated into manhood. This included the Yu Step, a hopping on one leg that could bewitch snakes, fish, and spirits. This Yao rite entered into the culture of the Yue people, who lived on the southeast coast around present-day Zhejiang.[18] An alternate theory for the origins of the Yao will be discussed later.

Excavations at the Hemudu site in northern Zhejiang, which began in 1973, evidenced a tribal people who had lived in the area five to seven thousand years ago.[19] These aborigines were named for the Yue feudal state found

near present-day Zhejiang during spring and autumn (770–476 BCE). The Yue hero was Yu the Great, Sinicized as the founder of the Xia dynasty.[20] Yu saved China from a devastating flood by hopping the Yu Step in a zigzag pattern on a design he had found on the carapace of a turtle that had emerged from the Luo River. This design was the Map of Change of the Eight Trigrams, and Yu's zigzag dance superimposed upon it the pattern of the Seven Stars constellation, thereby unleashing thunder magic, which destroyed the flood demons.[21] Yu danced for thirteen years until he became lame. His staggering gait is imitated in the *tangki*'s sacred Yu Step, a side-to-side walk featuring a dragging foot.

In 306 BCE, the kingdom of Chu to the west of Yue conquered Yue, and the Yue king Wuzhu fled south to establish the kingdom of Minyue in the region of present-day Fujian. The Yue taught the ancestors of the modern Hokkiens the magic Yu Step, which remains today the most efficacious ritual element performed by *tangkis* and Daoist priests.[22]

An alternate theory of Yao origins locates Panhu, the dragon-dog first Yao ancestor, living with twelve Yao clans in a paradisiacal world near the sacred Kuaiji Mountain where Yu the Great lies buried. From this location, near present-day Nanjing, the Yaos migrated by sea to where they live today in southwestern China.[23] ter Haar[24] disputes this story as a device allowing the Yao a claim of Chineseness. According to him, the Yao never lived near Nanjing, nor did they migrate by sea. In his retelling of the migration myth, ter Haar writes how the Yao had fled by boat but got lost at sea for months. They prayed to Panhu, who came to the rescue, leading five armies of ghost soldiers. The primordial Yao deity is thus presented as a warrior-exorcist, the mold for the present-day *tangki* who, like Panhu, commands the shadow armies of the North, South, East, West, and Center. Lost souls clamor to serve under the *tangki*'s banner in order to earn merit and rise above the rank of hungry ghosts[25]

Today, the Yao practice a form of Daoism,[26] but a trace of their ancient beliefs might be found in their worship of Hoi Fan, a distinctive Yao deity.[27] Two paintings of Hoi Fan feature in Yao ceremonials. The Hoi Fan Major Altar shows the deity with a sword in one hand and a red-hot plowshare in his mouth leading Daoist postulants up "Knife Mountain." Climbing ladders of swords and fire-walking feature in contemporary Yao initiation rituals and are also standards in present-day *tangki* ritual repertoires.

The Hoi Fan Sea Banner, or Minor Altar, shows the god holding a cup of lustral water. The other hand manipulates a ball of fire, likely to be a flash of lightning released in thunder magic. Hoi Fan wears the red headdress of a Daoist magician. Hoi Fan Sea Banner is featured with a serpent, recalling the Yue snake totem, and he wears only one boot. The other was apparently lost at sea, connecting Hoi Fan to the Panhu rescue. Crucially, the lost boot meant Hoi Fan walked with a limp. Panhu also limped because it is said that Laozi took one leg off the dog deity, replacing it with a paper limb (see the discussion of the legend of Xujia later in the essay). The Chinese have an equivalent one-shod exorcist figure: Zhong Kui, the demon-queller. Legend tells that Emperor Tang Minghuang (685–762) was ill and asleep one afternoon. Minghuang dreamt that a little demon entered his room in order to steal, then a bigger demon appeared to tear up and gobble down the little demon. Minghuang awoke fully recovered. He summoned court painter Wu Daozi to recreate the image of the exorcist he had just seen. Wu painted the demon-queller wearing magisterial robes shod with only one boot.[28] Zhong Kui has been proposed as an evolution of the Zhou (1100–221 BCE) exorcist *fangxiangshi*, the prototype of today's *tangki*, which is discussed later in the essay.[29]

The Shang rulers, like the Xia people, believed in magic. Shamans danced for the royal court. The lame, because they dragged their feet, were regarded as possessed of divine essence. They were made victims of Shang rainmaking ceremonies in which they were exposed naked to the scorching sun, or even burned at the stake in the belief that the God of Rain would come to their rescue. The present-day *tangki* reenacts the ancient sacrifice to the sun, for the *tangki* is always barefoot even when walking on sunbaked floors. His stomacher costume, a garment of underwear, emblematizes the *tangki* as "naked" to the sun.[30]

The Zhou dynasty, which followed Shang, comprised Confucian rationalists who dismissed the Shang court shamans. The latter went to the villages to earn their living as itinerant magicians, fortune tellers, shamans, and spirit mediums. These practitioners of magic were the forerunners of the modern *tangki*.[31] In the villages, they formed cults. They consolidated ancient tribal rituals with practices derived from vernacular texts of the sixth century BCE Daodejing and called themselves Daoists. From among them came Zhang Daoling, who in 142 founded the first organized Daoist church known as the Celestial Masters Sect.

Jonathan Chamberlain and James Legge propose that Zhang Daoling was a shaman and that the religious system

he proposed was a product of 2,000 years of superstition.[32] This claim is stoutly refused by liturgical Daoists. They say that Zhang had denounced the gods of the common people as bloodthirsty demons who accepted offerings of animal sacrifices and had proposed instead that the true gods were the pure and abstract emanations of the Dao.[33] The tension between the educated liturgical Daoist and the *tangkis* who they deemed vulgar and uneducated remains today, but we will postpone this discussion until after we have traced the history of *tangki practice* to the present day.

Although Zhou rationalists had dismissed Shang shamans from court, Zhou rulers were not above magic. The emperor himself presided at state exorcisms. These were parades where ritualists tore apart sacrificial animals. At the head of the procession was the *fangxiangshi*,[34] a wildly dancing warrior figure who, brandishing lance and shield, drove evil spirits out of the community.[35] The Zhou *fangxiangshi* is the prototype of the modern *tangki* who still performs as a warrior exorcist in ceremonial processions designed to banish evil spirits from the community.

The Historical Persecution of *Tangki* Practice

Confucius (551–479 BCE) defined the perfect gentleman as an intellectual (Analects 6.27) and instituted rule by the literati through a system of civil service examinations, which ran from 605 to 1905. The educated–uneducated divide also served the liturgical Daoists who despised the village Daoists. They promulgated the legend of Yinxi and Xujia to draw the line for discrimination on the basis of literacy:

> It is said that the legendary Laozi tired of the evil in Zhou society, so he decided to leave China. He journeyed west and arrived at the frontier. Yinxi, the guardian of the western pass begged Laozi to pass on his wisdom to the Chinese people. Laozi obliged with the *Book of 5,000 Characters*, which he gave to Yinxi, who became thus, the first recipient of the Daodejing, the Daoist canon.
>
> Unlike the educated Yinxi, Xujia was an illiterate commoner with an eye for women. Laozi came upon the skeleton of the murdered Xujia, and compassionately brought Xujia back to life. Laozi wrapped a red turban about Xujia's head. A male black dog (a reference to Panhu, ancestral god of the Yao people, see earlier discussions) had eaten Xujia's left leg, so Laozi took back a leg off the dog, replacing it with a paper limb. Laozi fitted Xujia with the dog's leg. Xujia was thus able to walk again, but now both he and the dog limped. The limping walk recalls the sacred Yu Step of *tangkis* and Daoist magicians.
>
> Xujia served the Master, but demanded wages in return. Laozi gave Xujia the *Heavenly Book without Writing*, a bell and a buffalo horn. Laozi told ungrateful Xujia that without the Daoist canon, he could only blow upon this horn till he coughed up blood in the hope that his call would be heeded.[36]

Daoist magicians who wear distinctive red headdresses name Xujia as their first ancestor. Schipper describes these "red-heads" as shamans and masters of the mediumistic *tangki*,[37] however I know Singapore, Indonesian, and Taiwanese "red-heads" who perform and are regarded as *tangkis*. I witnessed how Taiwanese *tangkis* had a distinctive penchant for striking their heads with maces so that the blood flowed freely down their foreheads. I can never forget the jellied veil of blood I saw upon a Taiwanese *tangki* at a Pingtung county parade. The blood on the forehead of Taiwanese *tangkis* represents the red headwear of the Daoist magician. It summons spirit soldiers to rise up to battle evil spirits lurking in the community.[38]

The educated–uneducated contestation extended to Song (960–1279) government officers who learned Daoist lore in order to defeat perverse sorcerers within their constituencies. Popular Song texts, the *Bozhai Bian* anthology by Shao Fang (1066–1141+), and the *Yijian Zhi* of Hong Mai (1123–1202), are compendiums of civic cleaning-up cases, which, having been written by the literate, show the illiterate magicians as vulgar and foolish. The clean-ups were also designed to Sinicize the Yao, who were targeted as black magic practitioners.[39] In Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911), Neo-Confucian rationalism was the brutal weapon of the state that was used to persecute shamans and spiritmediums lest they became centers of rebellious cults.[40]

In the fading years of empire, the Qing armies were humiliatingly defeated by Western forces. Qing reformer Kang Youwei (1858–1927) argued that Chinese weakness lay in their obsolete ideas epitomized in the worship of temple idols, a practice that foreigners found derisible. The modernization of China included the push to sort religion from superstitious chaff. With the fall of the Qing in 1911 came nation-building and the notion of the secular state. Sun

Yat Sen, the first president of the Republic, was a Christian iconoclast who as a youth had desecrated the statue of his village temple in order to demonstrate that there could be no divine retribution from a false god.[41] Nedostup reports how under the Nationalists, temples were destroyed and their property seized.[42]

In 1949, the Nationalist Army was defeated on the mainland and fled to Taiwan. The Communist Party, which now ruled China, was atheist, but Mao had proclaimed:

> All religions are permitted in China's Liberated Areas, in accordance with the principle of freedom of religious belief. All believers in Protestantism, Catholicism, Islamism, Buddhism and other faiths enjoy the protection of the people's government so long as they are abiding by its laws. Everyone is free to believe or not to believe; neither compulsion nor discrimination is permitted.[43]

Notwithstanding this assurance, the Cultural Revolution saw violent attacks against religion. The reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping include Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982) that prohibits discrimination against citizens on the basis of the religions "they believe in, or do not believe in." However, "superstitious practices" remain criminalized. With the opening of China to the world, Chinese popular religion has risen again to once more occupy a central role in Chinese culture.

The Rehabilitation of *Tangki* Practice in China

Fan reports that within three years of the close of the Cultural Revolution, there was "an extraordinary renaissance" in popular religion; "Temples are being rebuilt… mediums… are to be found everywhere."[44] Chau describes a "momentous revival" in Shaanbei, north-central China.[45] Temples were emerging as economic and political powerhouses. Police and local heads of government attended temple events where rituals, including spiritmediumism, were openly practiced. The Shaanbei Black Dragon King Temple, with coffers filled with "incense money," funded the building of a primary school and the reforestation of the temple environs.[46]

Tsai, in Fujian, Jiangxi, Hunan and Zhejiang provinces, and Dean, in Putian, tell of temple networks that act like "second governments," collecting funds and mobilizing populations to provide services to the communities.[47] Dean reports of Putian, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indonesian temples joined in spirit-medium training networks that serve as conduits for the repatriation of diasporic wealth to Putian mother temples.[48]

Tangki Practice in Taiwan

Tangki practice in Taiwan may have prehistoric roots. Archaeological evidence suggests that the ur-Sinic Yue had come to Taiwan 6,000 years ago.[49] Genetic testing demonstrates the Yue ancestry of Minnan Taiwanese.[50]

In 1949, the Nationalist Army, defeated by the communists, escaped to Taiwan in an exodus of some 1.5 million mainlanders.[51] This included the sixty-third pope of the Celestial Masters Sect.[52] Martial law was imposed during 1949–1987, and a tight grip was placed on religion, allowing no place for the *tangki*. Despite the repression of police and legal action, *tangkis* continued their healing work in the community, with a success rate that moved Kleinman to argue for a cultural perspective in modern medicine.[53] Western ethnographers who came to Taiwan from the 1970s to the 1990s were uninterested in the *tangki*. The exceptions include Jordan, who was the first to recognize that the lowly *tangki* was in fact the "prime rural religious arbiter," and Wolf, who wrote an ethnography of a female *tangki* in a Taiwanese village.[54]

In 1989, the Law on Civic Organization enacted religious freedom. The response was remarkable. The number of registered religious groups jumped from 83 in 1986 to 1,062 in 2004.[55] Many of the groups, like the Republic of China Association of Mediums, had existed during martial law but came forward only in 1989.[56] From 2000 on, we see more articles in English on the *tangki* in Taiwanese society. Chen tells of an urban *tangki* who specialized in ghost weddings.[57] The medium explained that modern contraceptives caused fewer babies to be born, which meant ghosts in hell had to wait longer for rebirth. Frustrated ghosts need to be appeased by marriage to other ghosts, or even to living persons. Lin described a village exorcism in which a *tangki* led a small group carrying a wok of boiling oil around the community.[58] The pot was brought into every home. Rice wine was spat into the oil, causing a flare-up designed to frighten demons from the vicinity.

***Tangki* Practices in Southeast Asia**

Mainland Southeast Asia

The primary religion of Indochina is a Theravada Buddhism where the nontheistic soteriology has been domesticated and popularized by the inclusion of local deities.[59] Had prehistoric *tangki* ideas contributed to Indochinese animism?

Sophisticated bronze metallurgy appeared suddenly in northeast Thailand in the mid–second millennium BCE. Recent scholarship has set aside the argument of an indigenous origin, for the transplantation of a "full-blown technology" from Erlitou (1900–1500 BCE) culture.[60] Erlitou, in Henan Province, is believed to be the site of the capital of the Xia dynasty, whose first emperor is Yu the Great, the mythical Yue hero.[61] Arguments of Yue links to Southeast Asia are concretized in the independent kingdom Nan Yueh (Namviet) formed in the region of northern modern Vietnam in the second century BCE.[62]

Vietnam

Vietnamese *len dong* spirit- mediumism shares many religious beliefs with *tangki* practices. For example, Thanh Mau, the supreme deity of the popular Vietnamese Holy Mothers cult, is believed to be supervised by the Jade Emperor and Guanyin; a Daoist-Buddhist pairing typical of *tangki* practice. Vietnamese martial spirit- mediums, like *tangkis*, run skewers through their cheeks. *Len dong* lore also teaches that mediums cannot volunteer to serve, but are chosen by the gods. The *len dong* medium is possessed by several deities, each signified by distinctive costume and mimesis.[63]

Cambodia

Willmott reports that the Chinese spirit-medium parade he encountered in Phnom Penh in 1963 continued to be practiced every Chinese New Year in Cambodia right up to 1969.[64] From 1970 to 1989, the Khmer Rouge genocide and the Vietnamese invasion decimated Cambodian urban society. In 1991, the renaissance of the Chinese community was heralded by the first Chinese New Year spirit-medium parade in twenty years.[65] I have not been to Cambodia and so depended on the Internet for information on the ritual practice. The Sino-Cambodian mediums are possessed by *neak ta*, indigenous "grandfather spirits." The familial term is the honorific used to refer to *tangki* deities. Costume signifiers in photographs posted by Keith Kelly on Flicker (no date) include two mediums possessed by indigenous earth gods identified by their names, "Tall Mountain Deity" and "Boundary Deity," appliqued in Chinese characters on their headdresses. In video clips, I recognized the Chinese God of War and the Chinese Monkey God.[66] The evidence leaves me in no doubt that the Chinese spirit-medium parade of Cambodia is *tangki* exorcism.

Thailand

The costumes and rituals of the Phuket Nine Emperor Gods spirit-medium parade, which is held annually in the ninth lunar month, mark the practice as indisputably *tangki*. The Tourist Authority of Thailand names the event the "Vegetarian Festival," highlighting the Buddhist dietary proscription of meat during the nine days of the festival. However, the signifying aspect of the parade is the gory self-mortification, which is sensationalized on the Internet. Chan explains the excessively brutal acts of some who pierce bicycles, beach parasols, and fluorescent light tubes through their cheeks as informed by notions of Buddhist karma.[67] The spiritmediums are regarded as bodhisattvas who sacrifice on behalf of the people.

Maritime Southeast Asia

Indonesia

In Indonesia, there are two distinctly Chinese enclaves where ethnicity is proclaimed by massive annual *tangki* parades. The *tangki* parades of *Capgohmeh* Chinese New Year of Singkawang, West Kalimantan, and the Burning of the Boat festival of Bagansiapiapi in Riau, Sumatra, are star events in the state Visit Indonesia calendar.

The Chinese of Singkawang are descendants of eighteenth-century Hakka miners who came to the region to mine for gold. In 2008, I witnessed a parade of some 500 spiritmediums who, through costume, props, and mimesis, portrayed themselves to be Chinese, Dayak, and Malay earth gods.[68] A second field trip to Singkawang in June–July 2009 confirmed that the majority of the spirit-medium gods of Singkawang are *Iatoks* ("grandfather"), local tutelary spirits, rather than exalted Daoist deities. The Singkawang Chinese spirit-mediums in parade thus presented themselves as a fraternity of warriors deities from the Three Ethnic Pillars of Singkawang—Malay, Dayak, and Chinese—a proposition of "peoplehood," which argued that the Chinese, like the Dayaks and Malays, are "sons of the soil" of Indonesia.[69]

The Bagansiapiapi in Riau, however, celebrates the arrival by sea of the town's founding fathers on the sixteenth of the fifth moon, 1826. The highlight of the festival, which is attended by many *tangkis*, is the burning of a large replica of a Hokkien-styled junk. Although this is a ritual to exorcise plague gods, the Hokkien-styled junk proclaims that the Bagansiapiapi event celebrates Chinese migration rather than Chinese "earthedness."

Malaysia

According to Carstens, *tangki* practice is intrinsic to life among the Chinese of nineteenth-century and contemporary Kuala Lumpur.[70] DeBernardi reports on an established Chinese spirit mediumism on the island of Penang.[71]

In Malaysia, as in Taiwan, temple committees are ascendant being the main organizers of religious festivals that galvanize entire townships. *Tangkis* are called upon to perform rituals, such as "clearing the way of evil spirits" at the head of processions, as at the Malacca King Boat festival, which I witnessed in 2001, or they are denied any official part in the celebrations, as I observed in Penang at the 2010 Chinese New Year annual float procession.

Singapore

I hold that a pristine *tangki* practice is to be found in Singapore. The 2014 Pew Report ranks Singapore as the world's most religiously diverse nation.[72] In this environment where the state largely has a hands-off attitude toward religion, *tangki* practice has flourished unmolested in the primal condition of fragmented small cults centered about individual *tangkis*. Elliot's seminal monograph gives accounts of devotees who turn to *tangkis* for spiritual solace, advice on cures, and lucky numbers to win the lottery.[73] Sixty years later, the Singapore *tangki* scene bustles even more with weekly processions crisscrossing the island and IT-savvy *tangki* devotees corresponding on social media.[74]

Conclusion: Reading *Tangki* Practice as Manuscript

The preceding discussions of *tangki* practice in China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia recall nineteenth-century Chinese ideas of diaspora as the spreading of roots afar. In distinctly botanical terms, Wang advised that Chinese traveling abroad should be like the bryophyllum leaf, falling to the ground to set down roots.[75] They should refuse total assimilation into the host culture when they would be like grass torn out, roots and all. The roots could well refer to indigenous practices of Chinese religion, for Lagerway had pronounced China as a religious state, and Yang spoke of religion as so thoroughly diffused into Chinese society that, to quote Eliot, "we can see a religion as the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture."[76] This is why when a rationalist state takes a scythe to folk beliefs, the roots remain to regrow.

If we are persuaded to this proposition, then it follows that we can read Chinese religion for narratives of a Chinese worldview. For example, if we recall the *tangki* as serving his community as warrior exorcist, then we may read the Great Wall of China and the Great Firewall of China as battlements that keep out barbaric invasion. We might extrapolate China's incorporation of the Spratly and Paracel islands within the national map not only as serving political and economic functions, but also as sacred duty.

The theology of *tangki* practice is greatly overlooked by scholars, a situation that owes to the Western bias in research. The Christian institution of church, canon, and clergy informs this prejudice, but Christianity was introduced to China only in the nineteenth century, and ancient Chinese religions, including *tangki* practice, do not

"fit" modernist molds of scientism and logocentrism. We are beginning to realize that what works in the West might not apply in the East, suggesting that we might do better with benign research methodologies, for instance Cooperrider and Srivatsva's notion of appreciative inquiry.[77] They argue that researching a problem to get at solutions only deepens the problems; instead, identify positive aspects to construct a more useful view of the situation. If *tangki* rituals are summarily dismissed as superstitions, the traditions will continue to baffle and elicit hostility. We do not need to see blood as gore, but we should think instead of the celebration of life—of festive red banners and red packets of lucky money for children during the Chinese New Year.

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Notes:

([1]) A cultural region joined by language, centered within the triangle of Quanzhou, Xiamen, and Zhangzhou in Fujian, but extending north to the Zhoushan archipelago of northeast Zhejiang, through to southeast Zhejiang; west to Jiangxi; south to Chaozhou, the Leizhou peninsula of southwest Guangdong, Putian, and Hainan.

([2]) No one can train to become a *tangki* (see note 3). Few people, if any, willingly become *tangkis.* The gods therefore "catch" their mediums. Novice *tangkis* train so that without coming out of a trance they can rise to their feet and dance, speak, sign mudras, and write talismans (see Margaret Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual: Tang-ki Chinese Spirit Medium Practice* [Singapore: Wee Kim Wee Centre, Singapore Management University, and SNP-Reference, 2006], 92–95).

([3]) Mediums possess spiritual childhood because they have "spirit bones." It is believed that unborn children grow as flowering plants in the Heavenly Garden. Thirty-six bones link to form a bridge between the soul of a person and the mortal realm. This thread of bones is severed at birth. However, for the medium, one bone remains to serve as a bridge enabling astral travel (Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 56–74). This last gift allows a medium's soul to leave the mortal body during spirit possession. The soul waits in the temple censer or within the Black Flag of the Emperor of the Dark Heavens, the guardian god of *tangkis*.

([4]) Linguist Jerry Norman disputed the etymon "*tong*" "*child*," arguing that "a shaman is always an adult and never a young boy" (Jerry Norman and Tsu-lin Mei, "The Austroasiatics in Ancient South China: Some Lexical Evidence," *Monumenta Serica* 32 [1976]: 296, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40726203). Spiritual childhood is a fundamental condition of *tangki* possession. The soul of a boy is incomplete, like a half-full container with space for an occupying spirit (Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 56–74). Whatever the age of the medium, and there are practicing *tangkis* in their eighties, he is spiritually a boy, a being of pure *yang* energy, unblemished by sexual relations with a *yin* female even though the mortal medium may be married.

([5]) *Tangki* practice is essentially a male tradition. *Tangkis* cut their tongues to produce *yang* (male, positive) blood with which to write talismans. *Tangkis* slash their bodies with swords to summon gods or defeat demons with the power of *yang* blood. All historical *tangki* prototypes are male figures. Female blood is *yin* (negative), and although there are now women *tangkis,* I have never seen a woman *tangki* use her blood in rituals. Women *tangkis* do pierce their bodies, but this is the process of taking on the spirit-power. It differs from blood-shedding rituals (Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 87–88, 108–113). Hell deities are also prominent in contemporary *tangki* practice. Theologically, hell is *yin*, but *tangki* hell deities are regarded as fortune gods and therefore positive energies, so male hell deity mediums do perform bloodletting.

([6]) Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 133–149; Margaret Chan, "Bodies for the Gods: Image Worship in Chinese Popular Religion," in *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*, ed. Julius Bautista, 197–215 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012).

([7]) Chan, "Bodies for the Gods."

([8]) Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, [1949] 1958), 10.

([9]) Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, [1951] 1964), 3–4, 434–438.

([10]) Cf. Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, [1971], 2003), xix.

([11]) Personal interview with Desmond Leong in Singapore on July 24, 2000.

([12]) The Law of Sacrifice set out in the Liji *Book of Rites* (fifth–third centuries BCE) permits the emperor to construct seven ancestral temples. A lord's quota was five, but ordinary people were prohibited from erecting any ancestral temples (Michael Puett, "The Offering of Food and the Creation of Order: The Practice of Sacrifice in Early China," in *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, ed. Roel Sterckx [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005], 78). This meant that the souls of deceased commoners would not receive offerings from the

public and so could not transform into deities (Chan, “Bodies for the Gods.”).

([13]) Chan, “Bodies for the Gods.”

([14]) The Ming novel attributed to Wu Cheng’en (1500–1582).

([15]) A timeline going back thousands of years can only be notional. I have chosen to use the chronology of Chinese history from Birgitta Leander, ed., “China: Past and Present,” *Cultures 34/35: Dialogue between the Peoples of the World* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1984), accessed December 14, 2014, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001298/129893eo.pdf.

([16]) Weipang Chao,“The Origin and Growth of the Fu Chi,” *Folklore Studies* 1 (1942): 9–27 (accessed December 6, 2014 [http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/1048]).

([17]) Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China*, trans. Alide Eberhard (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 139–145.

([18]) Eberhard, *Local Cultures of South and East China*, 72–75, 432–436.

([19]) Xiling Dai, “Face of Memory, Voice of Thought: Monumentality in Chinese Neolithic Bird Motif Artifacts” (M.A. thesis, University of Ferrara, University of Tarragona, Instituto Politecnico de Tomar, University of Tras os Montes e Alto Douro, and Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle, July 2009), accessed February 20, 2015, https://cld.pt/dl/download/ef42afff-d3a0-4c6c-a200-e398583d9d54/Dai_2009_Memory.pdf?public=ef42afff-d3a0-4c6c-a200-e398583d9d54.

([20]) Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China*, 433.

([21]) Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 81–86.

([22]) Poul Andersen, “The Practice of Bugang,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 5, no. 5 (1989): 15–53, accessed on December 2, 2014, http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/asie_0766-1177_1989_num_5_1_942; Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 23–28.

([23]) Jacques Lemoine, assisted by Donald Gibson, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*, ed. Jacques Lemoine (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1982), 15–20.

([24]) Barend J. Ter Haar, “A New Interpretation of the Yao Charters,” in *New Developments in Asian Studies*, ed. Paul van der Velde and Alex McKay, 3–19 (Oxford: Routledge, [1998] 2011).

([25]) Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 66–67; Kristofer Schipper, “Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (November 1985): 28 (accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2056823.28).

([26]) Eli Alberts, *A History of Daoism and the Yao People of South China* (Youngstown, N.Y.: Cambria, 2006).

([27]) Lemoine, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*, 83–96.

([28]) Stephen Little, “The Demon Queller and the Art of Qiu Ying (Ch’iu Ying),” *Artibus Asiae* 46, no. 1/2 (1985): 5–128 (accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250243).

([29]) Min Tian, “Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh: Nuo’s Role in the Origination and Formation of Noh,” *Comparative Drama* 37, nos. 3–4 (Fall 2003–Winter 2004): 348 (accessed December 5, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41154198).

([30]) Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual*, 33–34; Edward H. Schafer, “Ritual Exposure in Ancient China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 14, no. 1/2 (June 1951): 130–184 (accessed December 15, 2014; http://www.jstor.org/stable/2718298).

([31]) Enzheng Tong, “Magicians, Magic, and Shamanism in Ancient China,” *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 4, no. 1 (2002): 27–73 (accessed March 28, 2015, DOI: 10.1163/156852302322454495).

([32]) Jonathan Chamberlain, *Chinese Gods: An Introduction to Folk Religion* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith, [1983] 2009), 65–66; James Legge, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880), 180–181 (Internet archive, accessed December 15, 2014, https://archive.org/details/thereligionsofch00legguoft.Legge).

([33]) Terry Kleeman, "The Evolution of Daoist Cosmology and the Construction of the Common Sacred Realm," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (June 2005): 94–95 (accessed December 15, 2014, http://www.eastasia.ntu.edu.tw/chinese/data/200506/89-110.pdf).

([34]) The *fangxiangshi* was a Zhou ritualist described as wearing a bearskin mask set with four eyes. Lionel C. Hopkins, in "The Bearskin, Another Pictographic Reconnaissance from Primitive Prophylactic to Present-Day Panache: A Chinese Epigraphic Puzzle" (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, n.s., 75 [1943]: 110–117 [accessed December 5, 2014, DOI:10.1017/S0035869X00098208]), pointed to a Shang oracle bone ideograph of a tribesman wearing a bear hood as proof that there were earlier *fangxiangshi*.

([35]) Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances during the Han Dynasty, 206 BC–AD 220* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 75–138; Tian, "Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh," 344–348.

([36]) Schipper, "Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism"; Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1982] 1993), 226 n27.

([37]) Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 48–55.

([38]) Wei-ping Lin, "Son of Man or Son of God? The Spirit Medium in Chinese Popular Religion," in *Affliation and Transmission in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium, Abhandlungen fu¨r die Kunde des Morgenlandes, 78*, ed. Florian C. Reiter, 249–275 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012) (accessed on August 29, 2015, http://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/~anthro/download/article/wplin/wplin_2012c.pdf).

([39]) Judith M. Boltz, "Not by the Seal of Office Alone: New Weapons in the Battle with the Supernatural," in *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Ebrey and Peter Gregory, 272 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993).

([40]) Donald Sutton, "From Credulity to Scorn: Confucians Confront the Spirit Mediums in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 21, no. 2 (December 2000): 1–39 (accessed December 15, 2014, DOI: 10.1353/late.2000.0010).

([41]) Lyon Sharman, *Sun Yat-Sen; His Life and Its Meaning: A Critical Biography* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, [1934] 1968), 16–19.

([42]) Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

([43]) Mao Zedong. "On Coalition Government." Report to the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China. April 24, 1945.

([44]) Lizhu Fan, "Popular Religion in Contemporary China," *Social Compass* 50, no. 4 (2003): 449, 451 (accessed December 10, 2014, http://scp.sagepub.com/content/50/4/449).

([45]) Adam Yuet Chau, "The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China," *Modern China* 31, no. 2 (April 2005): 236–278 (accessed December 10, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062608).

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